DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 775 CS 202 632

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TITLE Rhetoric and Usage in Technical Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 76
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition Skills (Literary); Educational Philosophy; Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Rhetoric; *Teaching Methods; *Technical Writing; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Selecting criteria for usage is done in basically the same way for both technical writing and other forms of composition. Similarly, the same rhetorical theory applies to the teaching of both, and proves especially helpful in the teaching of formal report-writing skills in required freshman composition courses. Focusing on the appropriate voice, audience, subject matter, and purpose is vital to the clarity and readability of both formal and creative composition. (KS)

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RHETORIC AND USAGE IN TECHNICAL WRITING

Art Young

Selecting criteria for usage in technical writing is done the same way as selecting standards of usage in other forms of composition. It involves developing a theory of rhetoric and an understanding of what constitutes effective written prose. As composition teachers--whether of traditional Freshman English, advanced composition, technical writing, or creative writing--once we have developed such an understanding we can apply it to these and other kinds of writing which we teach in college courses under various labels. This is not to say that technical writing is not somehow different than creative writing--it certainly is--but rather to say that the same rhetorical theory applies to the teaching of both.

In my remarks today I would like to limit myself to considering usage in the formal report--the basic format for report writing in business, industry, government, and education. Most of us are familiar with the outward manifestation of such a report--the table of contents, an abstract or summary, headlines to clearly mark the introduction and various sections of the paper, perhaps a bibliography. However, I do not wish to limit myself to purely technical subject when considering this form--but rather include the whole range of general subject matter that might occur in freshman term papers--topics such as:

"Hyperactivity in children: What you should know"

"Should calculators be required in Math 130? the pros and cons"

or

"How to build a snow statue"

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Each of these reports would have a definite audience in mind: The first one on hyperactivity as an informative pamphlet that parents might read in a doctor's waiting room--the second on calculators as a report for the Department of Mathematics curriculum committee--the third on snow statues as a well-organized report that experienced students would leave to those who follow them to carry on this grand tradition.

Why am I asking you to envision subject matter deliberately non-technical? Well, one of the main reasons is that I am going to make a pitch that those of you who teach Freshman English consider using the formal report as part of your regular composition course. I do so now, and I find it an excellent format for instilling in unsuspecting students principles of rhetoric and usage.

In this paper I would like to discuss two things with you--first, the theory of applied rhetoric--that is, rhetoric as used in teaching, that I have developed and am most comfortable with--most of which is unashamedly swiped from various scholars in the field--such as Robert Gorrell--and second, how I use this theory in teaching technical writing, and in particular the formal report as a segment of the required Freshman composition course.

Probably the practitioner who has helped me the most in developing my theory of applied rhetoric is Professor Walker Gibson of the University of Massachusetts--particularly through his book Persona, as well as in the 1974 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar that he conducted. As far as I know, Walker Gibson has never written anything about, or even taught, technical writing, but I find the theory of composition that he expounds and generally applies to traditional essay writing, journalism, and creative writing, to be useful in my teaching of report writing. I emphasize this point--because colleagues I have talked with, who are undeniably experienced teachers of freshman composition, when requested by hostile forces to "bone-up" on technical

writing for an anticipated assignment in the coming year, feel as if they are entering a dog pound in which their familiar nourishment will be slim pickings. This has not been my experience.

Walker Gibson tells us in composing a piece of writing, or in teaching composing of writing, that we keep four essential things in mind--the voice of the writer, the audience addressed, the subject matter to be written on, and the purpose for which it is written. From these items we can then move to strategies of communication such as diction, tone, organization, etc. Familiar enough so far. But such strategies also work well in teaching technical writing, and work well in teaching freshman formal report writing at the end of a course in which they have been writing expository essays. I would like to elaborate on the first two points as they apply to the teaching of technical writing--voice and audience.

Although the range is more limited, the concept of voice--or speaker--or persona--applies with equal validity to the technical writer whose assignments might include public information brochures, instructional materials for specialists, or persuasive reports submitted to government agencies. The voice of a formal report is generally confident and distant, for he is one who has gathered information and is communicating to a reader who needs it, or one who has organized information and is presenting it to a reader who has not done so. This voice and this relationship then logically require certain things from the writer, not the least of which is that he use what we call Standard English to establish the credibility of his voice. It also generally demands a consistent point of view, and thus inconsistencies and ambiguities in the student writer's use of tense, or use of pronouns, can be examined in this rational context.

Likewise a technical writer addresses many audiences, as we can note from

the examples already given. In the Freshman class, in addition to simulating a definite audience--such as parents in a doctor's waiting room, or the vice-president in charge of marketing in a company--we posit an uninformed audience, as often is the case in professional report writing. Obviously such an audience makes additional demands on the writer if he is effectively to communicate his information--not the least of which is clear, concise sentence structure and paragraph development. Rhetorical strategies such as extended definition, or description, or comparison and contrast, perhaps previously examined in the course, will need to be used to clearly express an unfamiliar term or concept contained in the report. I like to think that professional communicators of information are beginning to understand this point. My automobile insurance company recently sent me another more understandable copy of my policy, my electric power company sent me a notice promising that in the very near future I would be able to understand my monthly bill, and I recently read where Governor Brown of California returned many of the reports submitted to his office by the State Department of Education because he couldn't understand the jargon. I also like to think that the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak has contributed to both communicator and consumer awareness on this issue. The lesson that I teach my students from these events, is that the voice of a formal report does not have to pretend to be totally objective and non-committed, as some tech writing textbooks advocate, because such a voice often sounds artificial, vague, deceitful, or just plain makes the subject matter seem incredible. Technical reports are written by people to people. Just because a person is writing a formal report, even a report that will speak for his organization or company, does not mean that he must strive to make the prose mechanical, unimaginative, and condensed beyond comprehension. Just as the hysterical has no place in the writing of good formal reports, neither has the insensible.

Another concept that applies to all writing, but that can be particularly useful in the teaching of technical writing, is readability--readability applied as a standard to measure the success of a writer. Professor E. D. Hirsch, Jr. of the University of Virginia delivered a paper on readability at the past MLA convention in San Francisco, and although his remarks were theoretical, and I must confess not entirely clear to me from his oral presentation (I look forward to the book he has promised us), readability as a criteria for evaluating the quality of student papers has proven useful to me. But more important than the evaluating of papers, it has proven to be a useful device in the classroom as I attempt to teach and aid students in the composing process. -- Thus in the case I am discussing --

Formal reports must be readable to the uniformed reader--that is, teacher and classmates, who in most cases do not know as much about the subject matter as the writer does. The more readable the paper is the better it is. Or, if you'll forgive me the jargon, good writing maximizes the readability quotient for the reader. (I couldn't resist that!) The more rapidly an individual reader understands the information the writer is communicating to him, the more successful the writer has been. This concept allows a framework for us as a class to talk about numerous conventions that are usually found in good technical writing--from typing and spelling accuracy (I was halfway through paper on "The Engineering S p r i t e" before I realized the writer meant S p i r i t--I was distracted, I had to reread--what was the readability quotient? The fog index?), well anyway, from typing and spelling accuracy, to paralellism in headlining and organization and the importance of well developed thesis statements--and the importance of placing thesis statements in a familiar place--such as at the beginning of paragraphs. We discuss how too many words to express an idea hurts readability, but likewise how not enough words, such

as transition words, also hurts readability. In this sense, technical writing is indeed less flexible than expository or creative writing. The expectations of the audience are different. Or, in other words, in technical writing the use of the unreliable narrator is a no-no. So are in-jokes about unreliable narrators that will need lengthy explanation to an uninformed audience. The point is--the voice in a technical report must be reliable because prose is more readable when a reader needs less time to understand the meaning securely. Thus irony, except the most unambiguous forms of irony, confuses the report reader who perhaps is just browsing in those areas of the report that may be of most interest to him. The creative writer frequently makes intellectual demands on his reader in understanding the form of his piece in order to better express his often complicated and ambiguous meaning. The technical writer also works with subject matter that is complicated and ambiguous, but he attempts to express himself in a form that is familiar and clear and quickly readable. Standardization of format and usage seems to aid him as he strives for these goals. Just as we have various voices when we write, we also have various selves when we read, selves with different expectations in reading. When we read a short story by Philip Roth, an essay by Joan Didion, and a faculty senate report on the status of the common curriculum, we become different selves with different expectations from each experience. Generally we would rather have the reader rather than the writer supply the irony for the common curriculum report.

I would like to end with one further comment. This paper may be construed to offer a rather prescriptive and dogmatic approach to formal report writing. This is an almost inevitable consequence of discussing a written form that practitioners admit must adhere to principles of standardization in usage and format. However, I do not wish to leave you with the impression of dogmatism. The clear, efficient, honest prose of a good report writer cannot be mastered strictly by

following the rules and filling in the blanks. In teaching technical writing, as in teaching other kinds of writing, the emphasis should not be on giving answers, but on discovering them. The emphasis should be on thinking through each unique problem of form and content, developing and considering options in rhetorical strategy and usage, and then choosing wisely based on considerations of voice, audience, subject matter, purpose and readability. With such an approach, the formal report may appear to contain the possibilities of the sonnet rather than the inevitable clatter of a computer print out.

Thank you.

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